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WASHINGTON | James Reston

Clumsy Soviet Antics

Officials here are still concerned about the arrest of Nicholas Daniloff, not because of its sneaky trickery but because of its clumsy stupidity.

Washington feels it can deal with the Kremlin's rational opposition and even with its bad intentions, but it fears bad judgment and miscalculation more than almost anything else.

In terms of the Soviet Union's own interests, tossing this veteran U.S. reporter in jail was undoubtedly the dumbest decision out of Moscow since it shot down the unarmed Korean airliner in September 1983. And even harder to understand, for in the destruction of the plane and its 269 passengers and crew at least some Soviet officials were apparently motivated by misplaced fear.

They had nothing to fear, however, from the arrest of Gennadi Zakharov, a two-bit spy at the U.N., where they have so many more; but quite a lot to lose by arresting Mr. Daniloff and dramatizing their contempt for public opinion and a free press.

This, after some dithering in the White House, brought even the Reagan Administration to the defense of honest reporting — not its favorite pastime — and raised some questions about the new crowd in the Kremlin.

Where, for example, was Anatoly Dobrynin during these bonehead plays? If he was on the job, it has to be assumed that he forgot everything he learned during his 25 years in Washington or has lost whatever influence he was supposed to have.

Or if both he and Mikhail Gorbachev were on vacation when Mr. Daniloff was tossed in the pokey, as we are told, we are left with the disturbing thoughts either that Mr. Gorbachev is not really in charge or that the Soviet cops do what they like when the General Secretary is out of town.

Incidentally, officials here say that Mr. Daniloff's arrest must have been ordered from the top, though it's not clear how anybody in Washington could be so sure, especially since the F.B.I. arrested Mr. Zakharov in New York before President Reagan or Secretary of State Shultz knew anything about it.

Either way, the issue of stupidity and clumsiness remains. For example, when Mr. Daniloff's Soviet acquaintance Misha handed him the package of so-called maps and documents, the K.G.B. grabbed the American reporter before he had a chance to see what was inside. For all Mr. Daniloff knew at that moment, it might have been a tin of caviar and a copy of the Soviet Constitution.

The result of all this hanky-panky has been to cast doubt on Mr. Gorbachev's carefully calculated campaign of reform at home and reconciliation abroad.

For months he has been cruising around Europe calling for "the need for an urgent radical break with many conventional approaches to foreign policy."

Scarcely a week has gone by this summer without some new offer of nuclear arms control by Moscow. Mr. Gorbachev has not only called for a comprehensive test ban on nuclear weapons, but has maintained a unilateral moratorium on Soviet testing, while urging President Reagan to do the same.

In addition, he has indicated a willingness to establish normal diplomatic relations with China, opened up a new line of negotiations with Japan, talked of encouraging peace in Southeast Asia and even started talking again about easing tensions with Israel.

At home, he has waged a campaign

Stupidity is worse than trickery

against inefficiency, drunkenness and corruption, encouraged some criticism of his own Government in the Soviet newspapers, and moved his own men into key positions in the Soviet hierarchy.

He has characterized these innovations as a "revolution" promising a better economic and political order in the world, and in the process has not only dominated the flow of foreign news but put President Reagan on the defensive.

Then came the Daniloff affair, which has undoubtedly wiped the smile off Mr. Gorbachev's face.

President Reagan, coming into the last two years of his Administration and hoping to leave behind some verifiable compromise with Moscow on nuclear weapons, now finds it more difficult to trade and compromise with Mr. Gorbachev, and even the long-promised summit meeting is now in jeopardy.

The chances are that Mr. Daniloff will come home a more famous man, free to write even more about the Soviet system. The Russians didn't count on that either, having created precisely the atmosphere they were trying to avoid. □